

SADDLE CAMP VEGETATION MANAGEMENT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DRAFT DECISION NOTICE AND FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

USDA Forest Service, Powell Ranger District,
Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest, Idaho County, Idaho

Background

I have decided to implement Alternative 3 as modified below and described in the Saddle Camp Vegetation Management Environmental Assessment (EA). This project is designed to reduce roadside fuels along Forest Road 107, increase big game browse, and improve forest health in the Indian Graves and Lost Creek drainages. The project area includes all or portions of Sections 3–5, 8–10, 15–18, 19–22, 29, and 30 of T36N R11E (Boise Meridian), Idaho County, Idaho.

Forest Road 107 is one of only three routes that connect US Highway 12 and the Lolo Motorway (FR 500) on the Powell Ranger District. It provides access for recreationists, firefighters and agency personnel. Tree densities are currently high along portions of the road making it unsafe for visitor and personnel egress in the event of a wildfire near the road.

Big game (elk, deer and moose) browse on designated winter range is currently limited due to a lack of early seral forest stages (<20 years old) in the project area. Less than 7% of the winter range currently provides preferred browse for big game species. These ungulates are an important ecological component to the landscape and also provide social benefits to surrounding communities.

Forest health is currently declining in the project area. Tree species composition and densities are not within desired ranges for the Saddle Camp landscape. Dense stands of shade tolerant species (grand fir, Douglas-fir) dominate the area. These species are more susceptible to insects and disease and easily crowd out the less susceptible intolerant species. The result is reduced species diversity and reduced overall forest health. Shade-tolerant species are also encroaching on small aspen stands in the area. These aspen stands are unique to the area and contribute to habitat diversity on the landscape. Ponderosa pines, a shade intolerant and more fire resistant species, occur in the lower portions of the project area but are surrounded by dense stands of young shade intolerant species. These trees have a high risk of dying in the event of a wildfire due to the ladder fuels that surround them. Ponderosa pines contribute to a diverse landscape.

Decision and Rationale

Alternative 3 as modified would treat approximately 3,465 acres in order to lower fuel loads, improve big game browse, and improve forest health. Treatments would include about 158 acres of Forest Road 107 roadside fuel treatment (thinning and pruning), about 3,216 acres of prescribed landscape burning, about 71 acres of commercial thinning, and roughly 20 acres of regeneration harvest. Timber harvest activities would include both ground-based and skyline yarding systems. Roughly 500 feet of temporary road would be built and then obliterated after use to access the commercial thin units.

I have made the following modifications to Alternative 3 based on public concerns:

- Removed all treatments from with PACFISH RHCA's
- Added road improvement work including grading and spot rocking of eroding portions of

Road 107, adding several cross drains on this road and replacing undersized or adding several culverts on Road 5601 to improve drainage

- Weeds would be pre-treated along Road 107 and 5601 one to two years prior to logging activities to minimize transport of weed seeds into the harvest units and along the roads.
- Monitoring of the units would occur 1 and 2 years after harvest and if weeds are detected, they would be sprayed.
- Additionally a 50' buffer of untreated shrubs would be retained above Road 107 where it bisects burn Unit 10 in order to minimize the risk of weed spread into the unit after burning. This area would also be monitored and treated if necessary.

Roadside fuel and commercial thinning treatments focus on removal of non-commercial and smaller trees of undesirable species to reduce ladder and crown fuels. Roadside fuel treatments along Forest Road 107 improve ingress and egress for firefighters and publics by reducing potential flame lengths on either side of the road. Surface fuel reduction and site preparation for tree planting in the regeneration harvest unit would be accomplished through prescribed fire (pile or broadcast burning). Landscape burning improves big game browse through the maintenance or creation of early seral forest stages and also reduces conifer encroachment on aspen stands, maintaining them and providing continued diversity on the landscape.

I have chosen to implement Alternative 3 as modified because the treatments will decrease fuels, increase browse and improve forest health. Treatments will increase firefighter safety during wildland fire by helping to keep fire on the ground and by providing for evacuation and access routes for the public and firefighters along Forest Road 107. Big game browse on winter range will be improved which will help the currently declining elk herds. The project will also improve forest health by increasing tree species diversity and reducing densities in the treated areas. The most fire tolerant tree species (ponderosa pine, larch, white pine) would be left while removing the less tolerant species (grand fir, Douglas-fir, cedar). The modifications made to Alternative 3 would help to reduce road surface erosion and control the spread of noxious weeds.

Other Alternatives Considered

A no action alternative (Alternative 1) was developed to display the effects and consequences of actions not taken.

A second action alternative, Alternative 2, was also considered and analyzed and was the original proposed action. This alternative conducted regeneration harvest on Units 1, 2, and 3 and contained an additional 966 acres of landscape burning (Unit #9). I did not select this alternative because: 1) the stands in Units 1, 2, and 3 are still growing vigorously and are not experiencing mortality from insects or disease (Alternative 3 commercially thins these units in order to allow for their continued growth), 2) the wildlife biologist analyzed burning in Unit #9 and determined that there would be little benefit to wildlife as a result of treatment, 3) a field review of Unit #9 indicated that there was not enough ground fuel to carry the fire, and 4) there was a concern that fire would negatively affect soil productivity.

Public Involvement

The Saddle Camp project first appeared in the NEPA Quarterly Report in January 2009. In July 2009, Powell District sent 206 informational scoping letters introducing the project to the

Nez Perce Tribe, the Confederated Colville Tribes, and interested members of the public and organizations on the Clearwater National Forest (CNF) and Powell Ranger District mailing lists. The Powell District received 7 comment letters in response.

The Forest Service consulted with the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and NOAA Fisheries. The Forest also presented the project to the Nez Perce Tribe in September 2009 and conducted a follow-up staff-to-staff meeting in February 2010. A second update to Nez Perce Tribe occurred in April 2013. And lastly, a project area field trip with the Nez Perce Tribe Watershed Division occurred in May 2013.

The Saddle Camp Environmental Assessment was released for comment in April of 2013. A total of 4 comment letters were received.

Issues

Issues identified during scoping were addressed either through the development of additional action alternatives or through specific design features. One commenter suggested that a reasonable range of alternatives be developed based on local data.

Alternative 3 (EA, pg. 21) was developed as a second action alternative based on both public and internal concerns and local information. A field review of Unit #9 indicated that burning would not benefit wildlife, could negatively affect soils, would not likely carry fire, and had public concern surrounding the effects on the Lolo Historic Trail. Alternative 3 also changed Units 1, 2, and 3 harvest prescriptions from regeneration to commercial thin based on the condition of the stand. The analysis provided a reasonable range of alternatives based on local data.

Two commenters suggested adding watershed improvement work as an additional purpose for the project based on the Upper Lochsa Corridor Assessment that was completed prior to project development.

Watershed improvement work has been implemented since the Assessment was written. A total of 4.9 miles of road was decommissioned, 1.2 miles were placed into intermittent storage and 2 culverts were replaced to provide aquatic organism passage in the project area. The highest priority watershed work in this area has been implemented since the Assessment was written. As a result of public comments to the EA, additional road improvement has been included in the selected alternative. This includes grading and spot rocking of eroding portions of Road 107, adding several cross drains on this road and replacing undersized or adding several culverts on Road 5601 to improve drainage.

The interdisciplinary team also considered the comments received during collaboration and scoping (presented in Chapter 2) to address the following issues:

The activities proposed could reduce stream shading potential and large woody debris recruitment resulting from the removal of small trees from PACFISH buffers.

While the analysis shows that proposed activities would not affect these parameters, I have decided to remove these activities from the proposal due to public concerns (Response to Comments and Errata, pgs. 6-7).

The proposed activities could affect water quality, soil productivity and stability, and threatened, MIS, or sensitive wildlife, fish and plants.

Project design features to minimize or eliminate effects to resources were developed and are shown in the EA, pgs. 23-24 and the effects analysis are shown for those resources in Chapter 3 beginning on page 27.

The activities proposed could spread existing or introduce new noxious weeds.

A project design feature to minimize the introduction of noxious weeds is included in Alternative 3 (EA, pg. 24). Additional design features and monitoring have been included based on public comment and include:

- *Weeds would be pre-treated along Road 107 and 5601 one to two years prior to logging activities to minimize transport of weed seeds into the harvest units and along the roads.*
- *Monitoring of the units would occur 1 and 2 years after harvest and if weeds are detected, they would be sprayed.*
- *Additionally a 50' buffer of untreated shrubs would be retained above Road 107 where it bisects burn Unit 10 in order to minimize the risk of weed spread into the unit after burning. This area would also be monitored and treated if necessary.*

The activities proposed could impact recreational traffic along Road 107 during the highest recreational use period.

A project design feature that allows harvest activities to occur only on weekdays during daytime hours was included to minimize the effects to recreational traffic are included in Alternative 3 (EA, pgs. 24).

The activities proposed could affect the two roadless areas or any undeveloped land contiguous to those roadless areas.

An analysis for the roadless and unroaded areas was conducted and presented in the EA (pgs. 102-111). Proposed activities are consistent with the Idaho Roadless Rule.

Finding of No Significant Impact

I have determined through the Saddle Camp Vegetation Management Environmental Assessment that this is not a major federal action individually or cumulatively that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not needed. This determination is based on the analysis of the context and intensity of the environmental effects, including the following factors:

- (1) Beneficial and adverse direct, indirect and cumulative environmental impacts discussed in the Environmental Assessment have been disclosed within the appropriate context and intensity. No significant effects on the human environment have been identified. There will be no significant direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to soil, water, fisheries, wildlife resources, roadless areas, or other components of the environment (*see EA Chapter 3 for discussion of effects*).
- (2) No significant adverse effects to public health or safety have been identified. None are unusual or unique to this project. Implementing Alternative 3 would have a beneficial effect on public health and safety (*EA, pg.7, Purpose and Need; pg. 44-45, Fuels Analysis*).
- (3) There will be no significant impacts to wetlands, park lands, wild and scenic rivers, floodplains, prime farm lands, old growth forests, range and forest land, minority groups, civil rights or consumers. There would be no significant effects to riparian areas, wetlands, and sensitive soil types and areas due to project design measures (*EA, pgs.23-24*). All Wild and Scenic River values within the Lochsa Wild and Scenic River Corridor would be protected (*EA, pg. 18; Wild and Scenic River Report, project file*).
- (4) The effects of implementation of this decision are not highly controversial and therefore there has been no scientifically backed information that indicates substantial controversy about the effects disclosed in the Environmental Assessment.
- (5) Based on similar actions in the area and the resource professionals that worked on this project, the probable effects of this decision on the human environment, as described in the EA, are well known and do not involve unique or unknown risks. Activities approved in this decision notice are routine projects similar to those that have been implemented under the Clearwater National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan over the past 2 decades.
- (6) This action does not establish precedence for future actions with significant effects, nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. Activities approved in this decision notice are routine projects similar to those that have been implemented under the Clearwater National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan over the past 2 decades.
- (7) This decision is made with consideration of past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions on National Forest land within potentially affected areas which could have a cumulative significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Each resource section effects analysis contained in the Saddle Camp Vegetation Management EA discusses cumulative effects; none were found to be significant (*EA, Chapter 3*).
- (8) Based on the pre-disturbance survey and record search, the project undertaking will have “no effect” on any listed or eligible historic cultural resources. Heritage resource

surveys were conducted in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act. A technical report which detailed the methods, results, and effects to cultural resources was submitted to the Idaho State Historic Preservation Office. In consultation with the Nez Perce Tribe and the State Historic Preservation Office it was determined that no historic properties will be affected by this project. Further, implementation of this project will have no direct, indirect, or cumulative effects on any cultural resources that are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (*EA*, pg. 11).

- (9) The effects on endangered or threatened species and their habitat are discussed in the Biological Assessment and Biological Evaluation located in the project file and in the EA (pgs. 12, 16, 26, 82). Informal consultation was conducted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries). There would be no adverse effect/impact on any endangered, threatened, or sensitive species that may inhabit the project area.
- (10) This decision is in compliance with relevant federal, state and local laws, regulations and requirements designed for the protection of the environment. Effects from this action meet or exceed state water quality standards (*EA*, pgs. 26, 90-97).

Other Findings

This decision is consistent with the goals, objectives, and direction contained in the 1987 Clearwater National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) (*EA*, pgs. 10, 13-16, 27, 43, 64, 67, 78, 89, 96, 97, 102, 110; see *Specialists Reports*, project file).

Management systems utilized in this decision are appropriate for meeting the land management objectives identified in the Forest Plan and consistent with the vegetative manipulation requirements of 16 USC 1604(g) and (k).

This decision is in compliance with Executive Order 12989 “Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations”. No minority or low-income populations would be disproportionately affected under either alternative (*EA*, pg. 16).

Administrative Review Opportunity

The EA was finalized and a 45-day pre-decisional objection opportunity was offered beginning on June ??, 2013. This project is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(i).

Implementation Date

Implementation of this project can begin within 5 days of the signing of the Decision Notice/FONSI if no objections are raised. If an objection is raised, the Decision Notice/FONSI would be signed and implementation would begin after a response is given.

Contact Person

For further information, contact Karen Smith, Project Team Leader, Kamiah Ranger Station, 1012 Hwy 64, Kamiah, ID, 83536, (phone 208-935-4252).

CRAIG TRULOCK
Lochsa/Powell District Ranger
Nez Perce- Clearwater National Forest

Date